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AUTHOR Ewald, Helen Rothschild
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ABSTRACT

The assumptions underpinning grammatical mistakes can often be detected by looking for patterns of errors in a student's work. Assumptions that negatively influence rhetorical effectiveness can similarly be detected through error analysis. On a smaller scale, error analysis can also reveal assumptions affecting rhetorical choice. Snags in the students' actual composing activity can also be spotted through error analysis. Grammatical correctness or rhetorical effectiveness cannot be evaluated without considering the activity that presented the grammatical or rhetorical form as a possible solution to the problem of making a meaningful statement. The primary reason the cognitive activity must be considered is that remediation of incorrect or ineffective structures depends upon changing that activity and upon altering the assumptions producing the miscues. Since error analysis can evaluate miscues involving literal, textual, and contextual meaning and offer suggestions concerning how to improve a writer's individual composing procedure, it should be considered as a process-oriented method of evaluating both the composing process and its products. (HOD)

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Error-Analysis for Correctness, Effectiveness, and Composing Procedure

Helen Rothschild Ewald

"Is this a complete sentence? IF I WANTED TO DO IT."

"No."

"What about WHEN A COLLEGE CAN BAN A SPEAKER."

"No. That's not."

"Good and how about I WOULD BE WRONG TO DO IT."

"That's okay."

"What about this: IF A COLLEGE WOULD BAN SUCH A SPEAKER. THE COLLEGE WOULD BE INFRINGING ON MY RIGHTS AND EVERYONE ELSE'S."

"That's okay, too."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

"What if it read: IF A COLLEGE WOULD BAN SUCH A SPEAKER."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"Then it wouldn't be a sentence."

"So you need the second part to make it complete."

"Yes."

"Good. Now let's talk about how to punctuate when this happens."

In the above dialogue, an instructor tests whether error-analysis has indeed revealed the cause of a student's fragments. Previous to the conference the instructor had observed that the student, a basically sound writer, wrote fragments only in the environment: subordinate clause, main

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clause, and had concluded that the student knew what a complete sentence was but had a mistaken impression of how to handle subordinate clauses in context.

Error-analysis seeks to discover the hypotheses or assumptions underlying miscues in a writer's text. Perhaps because error-analysis has its roots in ESL error evaluation, it is usually linked with grammatical miscues and their associated hypotheses. But error-analysis can also be used to gain insight into assumptions underpinning rhetorical misjudgments. As such, error-analysis becomes a tool for evaluating both the correctness and the effectiveness of a writer's work.

Let's first review how error-analysis can reveal the assumptions underlying grammatical miscues.

The assumptions underpinning grammatical mistakes can often be detected by looking for patterns of error in a student's work. Consider the following sentences, taken from four separate themes written by one student.

1. A point that was brought up almost immediately by my friends from residence halls was that it was cheaper to live in the dorms, as one said, "I don't mind 'frats;' that much, they are just too expensive to live in."
2. One way to adjust your snow plow is to spread the tails of your skis farther apart, this will make the wedge bigger and effectively slow you down.
3. I saw an ad in the paper, it said, "1969 Triumph Spitfire. Needs work. Good project car. $700 firm. 294-0780."
4. I have never been much disturbed by the controversial speakers on

campus. My roommate, however, starts shouting matches with them and calls them "radical pigs."

Here the data suggest that the student commits a comma fault when the subject of the second independent clause is a pronoun.

During subsequent tutoring, the student indeed consistently identified sentences with pronoun subjects as incomplete, "because you don't know who or what the subject is." In other words, the student had devised his own grammar rule for this particular syntactic situation. Unfortunately, the rule was based on a faulty premise.

Assumptions which negatively influence rhetorical effectiveness can similarly be detected through error-analysis.

For example, in Writing with Style John Trimble identifies "Never refer to the reader as you" and "Never use the first-person pronoun, "I" as two common superstitions inhibiting the beginner writer's use of point of view. Trimble presumably reached this conclusion after seeing the you and the I characteristically absent from student writing, even where they would have been rhetorically effective. His data thus suggested that assumptions concerning how themes should be written were unnecessarily limiting the students' rhetorical options. Although genre rules for the students, these assumptions were, for Trimble, mere "superstitions."[1]

On a smaller scale, the following sets of sentences taken from themes by one student also reveal assumptions affecting rhetorical choice:

1. In the following paragraphs I shall describe the results of the Black Students' Organization's Big 8 Conference on Black Student Government.

   a. After Maynard Jackson's addressial, a recreational dance was given, and the closing of the conference.

b. The following day (February the twentieth, Nineteen-hundred and Eighty-two), workshops began at 10:30 a.m. and lasted until 11:30 a.m. There were four workshops to choose from: "Black Male-Female Relationships," "Creative Thinking," "Real World: Rights and Responsibilities in Work," and "On Becoming" in which I personally phicilitated.

2. In the following paragraphs I shall describe the personality of my friend (John Harris), and scrutinize the motives behind why I feel and how I feel his personality in particular came about.

a. In my observations of John trying to figure out why is he so faddish orientative I decided to take a look at the environment from where he came from.

b. And if he didn't know what the latest best "tune" was he was stigmatized as being a "generic" (or square). So all of this keeping up with the crowd was nothing more than a period of personality molding for John. And it was so instilled into his psychology that he still functions like that developmental period.

Although there is a lot going on here, an initial assessment suggests that the student assumes it is rhetorically effective to begin every theme with an expressed statement of the writer's plan and to use large words, many words, and fancy spellings of words. (Indeed, the student automatically knew the conventional spelling of "facilitate" when asked.) In any case, this writer's assumptions represent his idiosyncratic context for composing.

Snags in the student's actual composing activity can also be spotted

through error-analysis. For example, Diane's writing was inconsistent: some of her themes were tightly organized and well-developed; others had no direction or detailed support. Error-analysis revealed that if the theme could be organized according to the who, what, where, when and how rubric, Diane did well. If not, she became lost. Indeed, early in her composing, she characteristically looked to the journalist's framework for her organization and then tried to force her material into it.

In the next instance, Suzanne experienced two seemingly unrelated problems: a fondness for a double-and sentence construction and an inability to pursue the point of her essay without a lot of introductory or extraneous material.

The double-and construction was striking for its frequency. The following sentences were taken from one theme:

1. Within minutes Granny arrived with her bag and proceeded to make Amelia comfortable and then set about preparing the necessities for the birth of Amelia's third child.
2. Today more and more nurse-midwives are appearing in hospitals and birthing centers and are even establishing their own private midwifery services under the supervision of an M.D.
3. The officials felt that these rates could be diminished if more midwives were trained and their services supervised by doctors and most importantly, stricter regulations should be enforced regarding their duties.
4. Before entering a college for nurse-midwives the perspective candidate must have completed a three-four year nursing program and be a registered nurse and must have obtained one year of experience in

obstetrical nursing.

5. Students must watch or assist in as many as forty-fifty labors and deliveries and manage at least twenty of those deliveries on their own.
6. More women are realizing the advantages to be had from a midwife attended birth such as a decrease in cost as compared to a traditional hospital birth with a doctor and the personalized attention received from the nurse-midwives and are therefore opting for this type of birthing procedure.

As it turned out, this syntactic pattern held the key to the activity underpinning Suzanne's more global rhetorical difficulties. In composing both sentences and themes, Suzanne initially used free writing but still had difficulty keeping up with her fast flowing thoughts. For her, one idea suggested another idea and another. Even during subsequent editing, Suzanne added rather than deleted. Her final papers were tour de forces in associative logic but were rhetorically ineffective.

In sum, and to paraphrase David Bartholomae, we cannot evaluate the grammatical correctness or rhetorical effectiveness of a piece of writing without considering the "activity" that presented the grammatical or rhetorical form "as a possible solution to the problem of making a meaningful statement."[2]

The primary reason the cognitive activity must be considered is that remediation of incorrect or ineffective structures depends upon changing that activity, upon altering the assumptions producing the miscues.

Take the case of Peter, our comma splicing student. When class lectures on correct punctuation and individual grammar reviews failed to

correct his problem, Peter was sent to the Writing Lab for tutoring. Only after the invalidity of his assumption about pronoun subjects was pointed out to him was Peter able to eliminate the error. He then did so by keying on pronoun subjects during proofreading.

Similarly, Michael, our wordmonger, effectively simplified his style and, in the process, eliminated his predication errors only after he became convinced that readers were more impressed with clarity than with cleverness.

Changes in composing activity have appeared harder to effect. Diane was able to delay but not eliminate her seizing of the journalist's heuristic. Suzanne eliminated her double-and constructions but not the cognitive activity underpinning them. She settled for writing ten to twelve pages as preparation for composing a five page paper. Cutting became her editorial strategy. Both Diane and Suzanne, however, did see improvement in their finished products.

Despite its benefits, error-analysis does have disadvantages.

1. Sometimes a large amount of data is needed to expose significant patterns of error and the hypotheses underpinning them. In such cases, the instructor must see a number of themes before accurate analysis is possible.
2. Often, time-consuming conferences are needed to verify the instructor's analysis.
3. Analytical integrity can at times be compromised by an instructor's enthusiasm for discovering patterns of error and ingenuity in reconstructing associated hypotheses.

Nevertheless, error-analysis remains a powerful tool for evaluating, and then effecting, correctness and effectiveness in a writer's work.

Underlying its power may be its ability to deal with three factors crucial to any communication situation; that is, error-analysis can cope with the grammatical, rhetorical, and social elements of a writer's work.[3] Error-analysis can evaluate miscues involving literal, textual, and contextual meaning. And, because of its cognitive base, error-analysis can offer suggestions concerning how to improve a writer's individual composing procedure. In short, error-analysis is a process-oriented method of evaluating both the composing process and its products.

Notes

[1]John R. Trimble, Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), pp. 88-89.

[2]David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," College Composition and Communication, XXXl (October 1980), 257.

[3]Speech act theorists view utterances as acts with locutionary (grammatical); illocutionary (rhetorical), and perlocutionary (social) elements. The parallel between their triad and the composition instructor's concern with grammatical rules, rhetorical convention, and composing procedure is a potentially fruitful one.